



October 22, 2007

**VIA ELECTRONIC FILING**

Marlene H. Dortch, Esquire  
Secretary  
Federal Communications Commission  
445 12th Street, SW  
Washington, DC 20554

**Re: Notification of Ex Parte Communication**  
**MB Docket Nos. 06-121 and 02-277**  
**MM Docket Nos. 01-235, 01-317, and 00-244**

Dear Ms. Dortch:

This is to advise you, in accordance with Section 1.1206 of the FCC's rules, that on October 19, 2007, George L. Mahoney, Vice President, Secretary, and General Counsel of Media General, Inc. ("Media General"), and I met with the Media Bureau officials noted on Appendix A. We discussed the history of the newspaper/broadcast cross-ownership rule; the positions Media General has previously taken in the above-referenced dockets; operation of Media General's properties in Tampa, Florida; the status of the proceedings; recent reports on media industry transactions; the extensive evidence in the record that supports repeal of the newspaper/broadcast cross-ownership rule; and possible avenues for resolving issues that have been raised in the proceedings. In addition to providing two copies of the comments and reply comments that Media General filed in these dockets on October 23, 2006, and January 16, 2007, the attached materials were provided at the meeting.

As required by Section 1.1206(b), as modified by the policies applicable to electronic filings, one electronic copy of this letter is being submitted for each above-referenced docket.

Very truly yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'M. Anne Swanson', with a long horizontal line extending to the right.

M. Anne Swanson

Enclosures  
cc w/encl. (by email): Individuals listed on Appendix A

## **Appendix A**

Rosemary Harold, Deputy Bureau Chief, Media Bureau  
William Freedman, Associate Bureau Chief, Media Bureau  
Christopher Robbins, Associate Bureau Chief, Media Bureau  
Royce Sherlock, Chief, Industry Analysis Division, Media Bureau  
Jamila Bess Johnson, Attorney Advisor, Industry Analysis Division  
Elvis Stumbergs, Attorney Advisor, Industry Analysis Division

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## **Monica and Bill All the Time and Everywhere: The Collapse of Gatekeeping and Agenda Setting in the New Media Environment**

Bruce A. Williams and Michael X. Delli Carpini

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# Monica and Bill All the Time and Everywhere

## The Collapse of Gatekeeping and Agenda Setting in the New Media Environment

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*This article argues that by providing virtually unlimited sources of political information, the new media environment undermines the idea that there are discrete gates through which political information passes: If there are no gates, there can be no gatekeepers. The difficulty of elites (political and media both) and academics in understanding the Lewinsky scandal stems from their failure to recognize the increasingly limited ability of journalists to act as gatekeepers. The disjuncture between elite attempts to both control and understand the scandal on one hand and the conclusions the public drew about this political spectacle on other hand speaks to some fundamental changes that have occurred in the role of the press in American society in the late 20th century.*

**Keywords:** gatekeeping; political scandal; Clinton-Lewinsky; new media

**In this article, we use the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal** to illustrate a fundamental change in the contemporary American media environment: the virtual elimination of the gatekeeping role of the mainstream press.<sup>1</sup> Although most current understanding of media and politics (held by scholars, citizens, and practitioners) assumes that journalists can and/or should operate as the gatekeeper for politically relevant information, the most profound impact of the new media environment may well be the way it undermines the ability of any elite to play this central role. The new media environment by providing virtually unlimited sources of political information (although these sources do not provide anything like an unlimited number of perspectives) undermines the idea that there are discrete gates through which political information passes: If there are no gates, there can be no gatekeepers. Although we are certainly not the first to note the

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changing role of journalists in this new media environment (see most notably, E. Katz, 1993), we believe that the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal illustrates how fundamental is this particular change in the role of the press.

We argue that although elites (political and media both) and academics on one hand had a great deal of trouble making sense of Monica and Bill, the public on the other hand seems to have had much less difficulty. We contend that the former groups' difficulty in understanding the scandal stems from their failure to recognize the increasingly limited ability of journalists to act as gatekeepers. The disjuncture between elite attempts to both control and understand the scandal on one hand and the conclusions the public drew about this political spectacle on the other hand speaks to some fundamental changes that have occurred in the role of the press in American society as we move into the 21st century.

Writing as we are at a time when the national agenda is focused on profound issues of war with Iraq, terrorism, and economic crisis, it may seem trivial to focus on the scandals of what now seems like a bygone age of pre-9/11 innocence. Nevertheless, we think that the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal still bears scrutiny because of what it revealed about the changing structure of the media environment within which political issues now play out in the United States. In short, these changes are not simply characteristics of the media coverage of political scandals but all issues on the political agenda.

This article is part of a larger project in which we try to make sense not just of Monica and Bill but also of the alterations in the media environment over the past 15 years and the implications of these changes for the role of the media in American politics. We argue that alterations in the media environment have eroded the always uneasy distinction between news and entertainment. Overall, this erosion, one result of which is the collapse of the gatekeeping function, is rapidly undermining the commonsense assumptions used by elites, citizens, and scholars to understand the role of the media in a democratic society. As scholars and citizens ourselves, we are divided over the implications of these changes for the state of American democracy. Optimistically, we believe that the erosion of elite gatekeeping and the emergence of multiple axes of information provide new opportunities for citizens to challenge elite control of political issues. Pessimistically, we are skeptical of the abilities of ordinary citizens to make use of these opportunities and suspicious of the degree to which even multiple axes of power are still shaped by more fundamental structures of economic and political power.

In making our argument, we try to avoid the twin pitfalls of either seeing these changes as so profound and revolutionary that they fundamentally alter the political world or of seeing them as incremental extensions of age-old features of politics, hence signifying nothing new. In his own analysis of television and journalism, Pierre Bourdieu (1998/1998) saw these pitfalls as two symmetrical illusions to which social scientists are prone (and that ironically are made more tempting by the desire of academics to publicize their views in the mass media):

On the one hand, there is the sense of something that has never been seen before. (There are sociologists who love this business, and it's very much the thing, especially on television, to announce the appearance of incredible phenomena or revolutions.) And, on the other hand (mostly from conservative sociologists), there's the opposite, "the way it always has been," "there's nothing new under the sun," "there'll always be people on top and people on the bottom," "the poor are always with us; and the rich too." (p. 43)

### THE THEORETICAL CENTRALITY OF GATEKEEPING

To understand how significant is the erosion of the gatekeeping role, it is first necessary to show how important this idea is to extant theories of the press and political communications research. An especially influential conceptualization of the role of the press in postwar American society called the *social responsibility theory* was formulated by Theodore Peterson (1956). Responding to a variety of social, political, and economic changes in the postwar era, Peterson sought to reconcile the growing centralization of ownership and decreasing competition in the printed press, the rise of an inherently centralized and expensive electronic media, and social science research and real-world events that raised concerns regarding the stability of democratic systems and the civic capacity of democratic citizens (Berelson, 1952; Schumpeter, 1942).

This new theory introduced (or reinforced) three significant conceptual distinctions. First, the news media was separated from entertainment media, with the former viewed as most directly responsible for fulfilling the media's civic functions. Second, within the news media, fact would be distinguished from opinion and news reporting would strive to be accurate, objective, and balanced. Third and most significant for this article, reflecting arguments made much earlier by Lippmann (1922), the public was distinguished from media elites and policy experts, with the former viewed as generally passive, easily manipulated consumers of information and the latter as information gatekeepers who represented the public's interest in the construction of political and social reality.

In essence, the social responsibility theory conceded the inevitability of both a centralized, privately owned media and of a less-than-engaged public and transferred much of the civic responsibility of the latter to a new class of information elites. The "truth" about the social and political world was no longer (if indeed it had ever been) constructed out of enlightened public discourse but instead emerged from a more managed and limited exchange among experts in the news media. Citizens were redefined as unsophisticated consumers of information, and the public was redefined as an audience.

The ability to maintain these distinctions and institutionalize professional journalists as political gatekeepers was aided from the 1950s through the early 1980s by the relative lack of competition that had led to the development of the social responsibility theory in the first place. For example, during this period,

television viewers had the choice of watching one to five channels, most or all of which broadcast news at the same time. The distinction of news from non-news was also preserved by the underlying assumption that public affairs programming would be free from the expectations of profitability. And it was somewhat ironically maintained by the nature of the audience itself. Readers of prestige news magazines and newspapers and viewers of public affairs broadcasting were a self-selected segment of the population, a more elite social, economic, and political strata of citizens. This elite audience signaled the serious nature of the content, distinguishing it from "popular" media. What developed were distinctions between the politically important and the politically insignificant based not on analyses of the actual political content and aesthetic worth of media programming but rather on the organization of producing institutions and the make-up of the audience.

Political communications researchers have wrestled with the implications of the emergence of this media formation. They have found that consistent with social responsibility theories of the press, the political agenda has been shaped by the symbiotic relationship that has developed between mainstream political actors and major news outlets (Bennett, 1988; Hallin, 1986). In this relationship, the mainstream news media acted as a monolithic gatekeeper while a limited set of political elites vied with each other to shape this agenda and how it was framed. Within this system, the public was often reduced to a passive consumer whose own attention to and interpretation of events was constrained by this limited information environment.

The degree to which public opinion is actually shaped by the outcome of this elite struggle has been explored by a generation of scholars. Employing a wide variety of increasingly sophisticated empirical methods, mainstream political communications researchers have found powerful and convincing evidence that the media acting as gatekeepers exercise significant influence on public opinion (e.g., Iyengar, 1994; Iyengar & Kinder, 1987; Page & Shapiro, 1992). However, it is important to recognize that this work assumes a particular model of the media environment described by the social responsibility theory of the press within which elites and citizens operate. If this environment has changed as we argue, then so too must our evaluations of this body of research: It is perhaps historically accurate but of limited relevance today. Indeed, it is somewhat ironic that this model of political communication, despite its relatively brief duration (the "golden age" of network news lasted only 20 years or so), has been taken by so many as the natural state of affairs against which all other models are judged.<sup>2</sup> After outlining the changes in the media environment that undermine both the social responsibility theory of the press and the role of media as gatekeepers, we use the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal to sketch the changing nature of the impact of the media on public opinion.

One result of the acceptance of the social responsibility theory of the press has been that most scholars of political communication tended to ignore the political implications of non-news genres: movies, television drama and

comedies, music, and so forth. Pointing out, as we do in the balance of this article, the political relevance of a wide variety of media is not a claim that such genres have only become politically important in the new media environment. In the 1960s and 1970s, Hollywood movies such as *Dr. Strangelove*, *Apocalypse Now*, and *Easy Rider* were important political texts for a large segment of the public. Similarly, novels such as *Catch 22*, *Slaughterhouse Five*, or *Gravity's Rainbow* became important conduits for communicating a variety of political values and perspectives given short shrift in the news. Our point is that such media have always been politically relevant, it was only the a priori assumptions of media scholars that prevented them from fully understanding this political significance.

### THE CHANGING MEDIA ENVIRONMENT AND THE BREAKDOWN OF GATEKEEPING

The media environment in the United States has changed dramatically in the past 15 years with the expansion of cable and satellite television, the growth of the Internet and World Wide Web, the horizontal and vertical integration of the media through conglomerates, the general availability of VCRs and remote television controls, and so forth. The new media environment is distinctive in several ways: the increased volume of information that is available; the increased speed with which information can be gathered, retrieved, and transmitted; the increased control given to consumers of the media; the fragmentation of media audiences and the resulting greater ability to target media messages to particular audiences; the greater decentralization of certain aspects of the media; and the greater interactive capacity between consumers and producers of media messages (Abramson, Arterton, & Orren, 1988; J. Katz, 1997). All told, these changes constitute a reshaping of the media environment that easily rivals those leading to the creation of the social responsibility theory and the structural development of the media as gatekeeper.

The aforementioned changes have made it difficult to maintain the always artificial distinction between public affairs and "mere" entertainment. Specifically, there has been an erosion of the walls constructed between the two types of media.

The division of media organizations into separate news, entertainment, and sports divisions, although still in place, has become more porous. Journalists, management executives, public officials, and entertainers develop celebrity identities that transcend any specific genre and allow them to move freely between these different genres. The distinction between fact and opinion or analysis is much less clearly identified by simple rules such as where it appears, who is saying it, or how it is labeled. Public affairs time slots have become overwhelmed by the range of options open to citizens: Traditional news can be gotten any time of the day through cable or the World Wide Web or equally ignored

at any time of the day. Even the informal standard operating procedures, routines, and beats that determined newsworthiness have come under serious rethinking both from within and outside the journalistic profession (Rosen, 1999). As audiences themselves absorb these changes and the erosion of formerly commonsense distinctions, they too begin to move freely between genres, eroding the gatekeeping ability of any single group of elites (e.g., "serious" journalists or political leaders).

The mainstream press in its gatekeeping role operates along a single axis of influence determined by the interaction between political elites and journalists. This point of interaction constitutes the gate through which information passes to the public. However, the new media environment disrupts the single axis system in three ways. First, the expansion of politically relevant media and the blurring of genres lead to a struggle within the media itself for the role of authoritative gatekeeper. Second, the expansion of media outlets and the obliterating of the normal news cycle have created new opportunities for nonmainstream political actors to influence the setting and framing of the political agenda (Kurtz, 1998). And third, this changed media environment has created new opportunities and pitfalls for the public to enter and interpret the political world. E. Katz (1993) for example in writing about media coverage of the Gulf War noted that 24-hour cable news outlets not only gathered news as rapidly as possible but also broadcast it as rapidly as possible, effectively eliminating the role of editors in the news production process. This left viewers themselves to try to sort out what was "really" happening as the war progressed.

In short, the new media environment creates a multiplicity of gates through which information passes to the public both in terms of the sheer number of sources of information (i.e., Internet, cable television, radio), the speed with which information is transmitted, and the types of genres the public uses for political information (i.e., movies, music, docudramas, talk shows). These changes create what John Fiske (1996) called a *multiaxiality* that "transforms any stability of categories into the fluidities of power" (p. 65). Whereas Fiske focused on three axes of class, race, and gender in his analysis, the concept of multiaxiality is useful for understanding the changing nature of mediated political discourse more generally. So, in this new media environment, myriad gates through which information passes create multiple axes of power to influence public opinion.

In one sense, multiaxiality is similar to older libertarian models of the press. In these pre-20th-century models, relatively unfettered opportunity for privately owned presses and few limits on what they published were assumed to foster a market place of ideas. Although the range and quality of information available through the press was an important element of this libertarian theory of the press (Siebert, Peterson, & Schramm, 1956), equally important (though less often articulated) was the belief that citizens had the ability, opportunity, and motivation to actively participate in the civic and cultural marketplace. Just as classical economic theory assumed an informed and rational consumer, so too libertarian

press theory assumed a citizenry able to sort through and draw rational conclusions from the booming, buzzing confusion of the marketplace of ideas. In addition, the libertarian theory made few distinctions between popular and elite information, between fact and opinion, between the entertaining and the informative, or between culture and politics. The “truth” about the social and political world did not emerge from the pages of newspapers and pamphlets but was constructed and constantly revisited through the interaction of popular information and popular discourse.

Yet, the new multiaxial media environment is also quite different from earlier models of the press and media influence, primarily because of the centrality and omnipresence of the media itself. Libertarian and social responsibility theories of the press assumed either explicitly or implicitly that the political values citizens use to interpret information and the information itself come from a wide variety of sources of which the media itself is only one. Much empirical communications research (often bundled together and labeled the *minimal effects* model) supports these assumptions by finding that the media exercise only limited influence over basic political values (as evidenced by the research on political socialization that operates through family, school, friends, coworkers, etc.) and that due to limited interest, media messages are filtered (via the two-step flow) through an attentive elite. This neat distinction between the media and life outside the media is another casualty of the new media environment. When we spend so much of our day attending to the media—be it watching television, videotapes, and movies; cruising the Internet; playing video games; listening to music and radio; and so forth—life “on the screen” is no longer distinct from life “out there.” Increasingly, the media in all its new forms is where we live. To paraphrase Marshall McLuhan (1995), the new media are not bridges between people and life; they are life. The new media are not ways of relating us to “real” life; they are real life and they reshape real life at will.<sup>3</sup> It seems to us that this creates a fundamentally new set of challenges for citizenship and democracy unimagined by older theories of the press or much communications research.

At one level, the collapse of gatekeeping represents a direct attack on the elites (journalists, policy experts, public officials, academics, etc.) who have served as the arbiters of social and political meaning under the social responsibility theory. To some extent, this responsibility is returning to the public as they play a more active role in constructing social and political meaning out of the mix of mediated narratives with which they are presented. We find much evidence of this in the public’s ability to make sense of the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal. But in other ways, the media remains elite dominated, and the changes described earlier are simply alterations in the rules of the game, creating new venues through which traditional political elites attempt to shape the political agenda in new ways. How able citizens are to search for diverse sources of information and critically evaluate what they find is a troubling question. We illustrate these contradictory tendencies and the pressing need for a new theory of the

press that accounts for them by examining the Lewinsky-Clinton media spectacle.

### SEX, LIES, AND VIDEOTAPES: A CASE STUDY OF THE NEW MEDIA POLITICS

The Clinton-Lewinsky scandal was the last in a long series of “bimbo eruptions” that had plagued Bill Clinton throughout his political career.<sup>4</sup> The declining ability of political elites and the mainstream press to act as gatekeepers along with the increasing role of alternative media sources can be chronicled by comparing the responses of the Clinton campaigns and administrations (assuming there is any longer a difference between those two terms) and the mainstream press to each successive accusation leveled by first Connie Hamzey, then Gennifer Flowers, then Paula Jones, then Kathleen Willey, and finally Monica Lewinsky. Although we focus here on Bill Clinton, it would also be interesting to analyze why allegations about his behavior became a staple of a wide variety of media outlets and American public discourse while allegations about other politicians (e.g., long-running rumors about George Bush and Newt Gingrich) did not cross the threshold into widely circulated stories or public discussion.<sup>5</sup> Clearly, there is room for a comparative sociology of modern sex scandals and their coverage in the mass media.

Establishing a pattern that would repeat itself many times, the first allegations about Bill Clinton surfaced in alternative media outlets. In November of 1991, a Little Rock talk radio station aired accusations made by Connie Hamzey (whose previous claim to fame had been that she was a well-known rock and roll groupie) that she had been propositioned by then Governor Bill Clinton in 1983. Hamzey’s accusations were originally made as part of a *Penthouse* story about her that by the way also included nude photos.<sup>6</sup> Hamzey’s story was picked up by CNN *Headline News*.

The Clinton campaign’s response reflected the then still relatively intact world of elite gatekeeping. Senior advisor George Stephanopoulos deployed his “People will think you are scum” strategy, later to be immortalized in the “documentary” *The War Room*.<sup>7</sup> This approach relies on two features of mainstream journalistic practice: ethical concerns over the propriety of covering the private lives of public figures and the need for on-the-record sources on both sides of a story. So, while refusing to go on the record to even deny the charges (as this would then provide two sides to the story and make it a legitimate topic), Stephanopoulos called CNN and “started screaming” about the propriety of the story while refusing to comment to other reporters who called. Tellingly, this strategy also relies on the ability of the mainstream press to act as the primary conduit of political information to the public. “It worked. CNN dropped the

story after a single mention, and none of the other networks picked it up. . . . We'd survived our first bimbo eruption" (Stephanopoulos, 1999, p. 55). By 1998 and the Lewinsky scandal, none of these underlying assumptions would still be valid and such strategies would consistently fail.

In mid-January of 1992, *The Star*, a national tabloid specializing in stories about the personal lives of celebrities, published a series of stories in which Gennifer Flowers claimed to have had a 12-year affair with Bill Clinton. Again, the people will think you are scum strategy seemed to work. The story was initially downplayed in the mainstream press in part because the allegations were 2 years old, having been first made public while Clinton was governor. It was also initially ignored because *The Star*, described in one mainstream newspaper article as better than most of the national tabloids but still a step below *The National Enquirer*, was deemed an unreliable source.<sup>8</sup>

However, reflecting the proliferation of media outlets, the increasing difficulty of distinguishing between mainstream and nonmainstream press, and the embarrassing existence of tape-recorded conversations between Flowers and Clinton, the story would not go away. Fox news affiliates and the *New York Post* both picked up the item (being both owned by Rupert Murdoch, they provide evidence for supporters of Hillary Clinton's claims of a vast right-wing conspiracy, VRWC hereafter), and the "big feet" press—*The Wall Street Journal* and *The Boston Globe*—assigned reporters to the story.

Bill and Hillary Clinton's decision to directly address the issue by appearing on *60 Minutes* right after the Super Bowl brought the issue more centrally into the mainstream press. Noting the significance of this very new strategy, Stephanopoulos (1999) said that it was "the media equivalent of chemotherapy. *60 Minutes* was strong enough to cure us—if it didn't kill us first" (p. 62). The Clinton appearance helped to frame the issue for New Hampshire voters as a referendum on the appropriate focus of the press and politics. Despite CNN's live coverage of Gennifer Flowers's press conference the following day, at which she played some of the tapes, the Clintons had succeeded and the "comeback kid" was born. Here we have a glimpse of the ability of the public to distinguish between the entertainment value of disclosures (in a variety of media outlets) about the private lives of public figures and their perhaps dubious relevance for judging the public performance of politicians.

Although the role of quasi-alternative media was increasing, the focus of struggle still centered on the mainstream press. Even though the Clintons' efforts were successful in rallying public support and partially diffusing the issue, the alleged affair had now gained legitimacy within the mainstream press as a campaign issue. To justify their expanded coverage, members of the press could point to the existence of legitimate sources (e.g., the Clintons themselves) and to the fact that other traditional news outlets were covering the story. The press could also justify covering what was initially defined as a private matter by focusing on the issue of "lying to the public"—a theme that would emerge time and again over the next 7 years. Interestingly enough, as the mainstream press

devoted more and more coverage to issues of scandal, the tabloid press “suffered from these incursions on its turf . . . the *National Enquirer*, the *Star* and the *Globe*—each lost 30 percent in circulation from 1991 to 1996” (Gabler, 1998, p. 92).

At least two outcomes of the Flowers story are worth noting. First, the proliferation of media outlets searching for political stories and using a wide variety of approaches to defining what constitutes a legitimate story erodes the gatekeeping function of the mainstream press by making it more difficult to exercise any control over what is covered.

To hold the line when everyone, including its own middle-class readers, was already familiar with a story, when everyone seemed to think it was the biggest story around, would have been foolish and self-defeating. The Flowers disclosure was only the final station on this long road to conflation. (Gabler, 1998, p. 93)

Second, despite the sea changes occurring, journalists and political elites remained locked in a set of practices that had been defined in the social responsibility era of the press and assumed a continuing role for the mainstream media as gatekeepers. That is, throughout the Paula Jones and Monica Lewinsky scandals, journalists, editors, and political elites still negotiated with each other over the appropriateness of particular stories and the frames they would use as if the outcomes of such deliberations would still control the political information available to the public.

This pattern within the mainstream press of initially ignoring and then reluctantly reacting to issues initially raised in the nontraditional media was also characteristic of the Paula Jones incident. Whereas mainstream coverage ebbed and flowed throughout most of 1994 (driven largely by events in the civil suit) and largely disappeared throughout all of 1995 (as a result of legal appeals that put much of the case on hold), nonmainstream coverage filled the gaps in this coverage, keeping the issue firmly on its agenda.

So, initial stories about Paula Jones and Troopergate written by a *Los Angeles Times* reporter were killed by editors until the story was published by David Brock in the *American Spectator*. Providing more support for VRWC claims: Brock was infamous for his anti-Anita Hill stories and Clinton archenemy Clint Jackson helped sell the story. Once in the alternative media, the Troopergate stories forced the hand of the more mainstream *Los Angeles Times*, which then ran its reporter's stories (Isikoff, 1999).

Similarly, no major network covered Jones's first press conference in 1994 held at the Conservative Political Action Committee's annual convention, and neither would *The Washington Post* print Michael Isikoff's stories that largely confirmed Jones's accusations. These decisions reflected the traditional elite-dominated workings of the gatekeeping model: debates within news organizations over the public's right/need to know and negotiations with political elites over the shape and content of what is news. Of course, such machinations are

based on the increasingly dubious assumption that it is only through the mainstream media that the public gets its political information.

In his own tell-all book, Isikoff (1999) described the debates within the *Post* about the propriety of the story. If Isikoff is to be believed, debate was less over whether the story was true (there seemed little doubt about that) but whether the public should know (the essence of gatekeeping): "Editors always wanted to know these things. They hardly ever wanted to publish them" (p. 61). Another factor in the decision of the mainstream press to curtail coverage of the Jones case were actions of the White House. After personally arguing with Isikoff, Stephanopoulos took his you are scum strategy to the next level and made a direct pitch to *Post* editor Len Downie "over crab cakes in the dining room of the Jefferson Hotel (Stephanopoulos, 1999, p. 270).

In November of 1996, the *American Lawyer* published a long story that chastised the press for its failure to more fully explore the Jones case. How do we classify *American Lawyer*? Neither mainstream, conservative, nor fringe, it is published by Steven Brill, who used the story as a way to gain publicity and credibility for the magazine (see also footnotes 3 and 5). Although other mainstream outlets did not bite on the *American Lawyer*, radio talk show host Don Imus did, and the Jones story began to receive regular coverage. Indeed, one of the things that made negotiations between Clinton and Jones's lawyers so difficult was the demand by Jones for a public apology by the president that would compensate for her continuous "sliming" by entertainment figures such as Jay Leno, David Letterman, Howard Stern, and others (Isikoff, 1999).

So, it was not until 1997 that the Paula Jones issue, which had been essentially kept alive for the past 3 years by the nonmainstream press and entertainment media, became an ongoing news story, driven largely by events surrounding the civil suit and the heating up of rhetoric within both the Clinton and the Jones camps. Although in some ways this increased attention suggests that the mainstream media had recaptured control of the political agenda, most of the stories were initially generated through leaks, reports, and rumors that first emerged over the Internet, from conservative publications, and/or from the cable talk shows. Thus, although the mainstream press had more firmly embraced the issue as newsworthy (the actions of political elites—e.g., Clinton's hiring of lawyer Robert Bennett to handle the Jones case—were central to this decision), it was still reacting to an agenda that was being framed largely by others. Mainstream news sources such as the evening news and the prestige newspapers were also disadvantaged by the collapse of the normal twice-a-day news cycle and its rapid replacement with 24-hour-a-day breaking news (Kurtz, 1998).

At this point in the story, all semblance of a distinction between mainstream and alternative media sources begins to disappear as Matt Drudge appears on the scene. Using the Internet to publish insider tidbits about the rich, famous, and powerful, Drudge saw himself as the new Walter Winchell. This association is quite important because it reminds us, as would Bourdieu, that we need to keep

the new media environment in a historical perspective and not overemphasize the uniqueness of developments. Gabler (1998) argued that Winchell is the prototype for the journalist as celebrity who blurs the lines between news and entertainment to become a powerful force in American public life. He traced Winchell's lineage through Edward R. Murrow and Barbara Walters (who of course was the lucky interviewer of Monica Lewinsky). So, although Matt Drudge did not constitute a completely unique figure, his use of the Internet to disseminate his scoops is significant for the way it added a new wrinkle further undermining the gatekeeping ability of mainstream journalists.

Although he may have been publicly excoriated by political and media elites as the various Clinton scandals played out, he was embraced by those very same elites as the next big thing. Isikoff met Drudge when he was squired around the *Newsweek* offices by editor Howard Fineman. Indeed, Isikoff actually swapped information with him about the Starr investigation because "I, of course, couldn't let it look as if Drudge knew something I didn't" (Isikoff, 1999, p. 145). Fineman himself met Drudge at a dinner party in his honor hosted by David Brock and attended by "a star-studded cast of political and journalistic notables" (Isikoff, 1999, p. 145). In any event, by combining the sensibilities of a gadfly; a seemingly unquenchable hunger for celebrity, acceptance, and power; and the opportunities for gaining access to a wide public presented by the Internet, more than any other figure in the Clinton saga, Drudge undermined the gatekeeping function of the mainstream press and political elites. Indeed, the Agence France Presse, the world's oldest wire service, listed Drudge's breaking of the Lewinsky story on January 19, 1998, as one of the 10 key dates in 20th-century media history (Grossman, 1999).

In July 1997, lawyers for President Clinton and Paula Jones were on the verge of a settlement that would have effectively ended the Kathleen Willey and most likely the Monica Lewinsky scandals before they started. At the same time, Isikoff, after being tipped off by Jones's lawyers and helped by the Clinton-conspiracy Guarino Report (more VRWC evidence), was hot on the trail of Kathleen Willey but consistent with the strictures of the mainstream press, had little faith that his story would be printed. However, Drudge broke the story on July 29th, and the leak exploded the Willey story into the mainstream media and effectively ended the negotiations between the president and Jones's lawyers.

Isikoff (1999) captured the frustration of mainstream reporters, which would of course repeat itself in the Lewinsky story. Internal negotiations within the magazine over whether to publish his story reflected the old assumptions of media gatekeeping. Editors and reporters wanted to make sure that "information would hold up *if and when Newsweek decided there was something worth sharing with the public* [italics added]" (pp. 234-235). Drudge's leak revealed the futility and outdatedness of such deliberations.

Only a few days earlier, we had no intention of writing a story about Kathleen Willey. Were we—as some critics later charged—using a scurrilous Internet

gossip columnist as a pretext for publishing something that didn't meet the magazine's usual standards for what is fit to print? It was a tough call. (p. 155)

By January 1998, as another leak by Drudge aired the content of another Isikoff *Newsweek* story that had been spiked, the Clinton presidency stood at the brink of dissolution rocked by another sex scandal and another controversial Star(r) report—this time that of Independent Counsel Kenneth Starr—focusing on an alleged affair between President Clinton and a White House intern, Monica Lewinsky. Isikoff's (1999) account of the weekend when the *Drudge Report* broke the story is a surreal commentary on the complete obliteration of the boundaries between the mainstream press and other media outlets. After losing the battle with his editors to run the story, he found out about Drudge's leak and rebuked Bill Kristol for referring to it on the Sunday television talk show *ABC This Week*: "How could he rely on anything that guy writes?" (p. 340). Isikoff wondered, "Will the story break out into the mainstream?" (p. 341). When the story did break out on Tuesday, *Newsweek* decided to post Isikoff's original story on its Web site. Here we are truly through the looking glass of the new media environment and the hyperreality of the modern political spectacle as a reporter who knows the story to be true rebukes those who talk about it on television because they rely on a "bottom-feeding" source and wonders if it will make it into the mainstream after it has been on television—a medium on which Isikoff himself appears regularly (he cut short an earlier meeting with Linda Tripp to appear on Chris Mathews's *Hardball*)—because it's not truly a "real" event until it has made it into the mainstream print press (albeit the Internet version of the magazine).

For all the attention generated by the Paula Jones case, it paled in comparison to the explosion of coverage in January of 1998. The last 10 days of that month generated more newspaper stories around the country than all the articles and commentaries written on all the eruptions from Connie Hamzey to Kathleen Willey combined. Although journalists continued to periodically stop and reflect on whether this was a topic worthy of this amount of attention or to lament the decline in journalistic standards in reporting, they had by this time succumbed to the new system. Matt Drudge emerged as a prominent commentator on "serious" television shows such as *Meet the Press* (where he appeared with Isikoff). At the same time, journalists and news reporters frequently appeared on talk shows. Following the lead of *Newsweek*, mainstream publications such as *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* "prepublished" and updated their stories on the Internet. Other news (and sometimes non-news) outlets became sources for their stories. The commentary of comedians such as Jay Leno, David Letterman, Bill Maher, and Al Franken became the topic of stories on the evening news and in the major daily newspapers while the news stories broadcast or published that day were the subject of that evening's monologue.

With Clinton-Lewinsky, all notions that one could make clear-cut distinctions between serious and less serious news outlets, even between news and

non-news genres had been effectively destroyed. Whether one started the day by listening to National Public Radio or Howard Stern, by watching *Good Morning America* or CNN, by reading *The New York Times* or the *Star*, the topic was the same. Viewers of daytime talk shows such as NBC's *Leeza* could watch a panel consisting of a Washington newspaper correspondent, a public relations expert who works with celebrities, a gossip columnist, and a television star who had gone through a very public divorce discuss the way Hillary Clinton was handling the media spotlight. An Internet search under the heading "Monica Lewinsky" would produce more than 12,000 options ranging from the latest news report, to "the Monica Lewinsky Fan Club," to the pornographic Web site "Monica Ate My Balls." (In fact, Internet search engines have become one of the more significant gatekeepers in the new media environment and their operations, although little studied, hold increasing political significance.<sup>9</sup>) E-mails sharing the latest Clinton/Lewinsky jokes were commonplace in offices around the country. The early evening local and national news competed not only with each other but with the *Drudge Report* (50,000 hits per day at the height of the scandal, a large proportion of which were mainstream journalists themselves) and television tabloid shows such as *Entertainment Tonight*, *Hard Copy*, and *A Current Affair* (the latter two whose names had taken on interesting double meanings) for the latest details and interpretations of the scandal. Primetime dramas and comedies either made direct references to the scandal or their usual fare of sex, infidelity, power, and conspiracy took on new meanings. Cable talk shows such as *Hardball* and *Rivera Live* and all-news cable networks such as MSNBC became virtually all Monica, all the time. Late evening news was no different, to be followed into the wee hours by more "discussion" of the scandal by news anchor Ted Koppel; comedians Jay Leno, David Letterman, Bill Maher, and Conan O'Brien; and cross-over personalities such as sportscaster-turned-newscaster Keith Oberman. One could literally spend 24 hours a day watching, listening to, and reading about the Clinton scandal. More tellingly, one could do so without ever tuning in or picking up a traditional news source.

Reflecting the ability of the new media to obliterate both time and space, the story flowed across national borders, where it also crossed genres and audiences. For example, whereas "serious" commentary in Israeli newspapers focused on the impact of the scandal on prospects for a Middle East peace settlement, commercials for spot removers on Israeli television spoofed the scandal—private detectives searching Lewinsky's closet are distressed to find a can of the advertiser's spot remover lying next to "the" dress. Similarly, the scandal both dominated the mainstream British press and was also used in commercials to sell a newspaper's weekly job listings (a Clinton impersonator asks his aid why he should be interested in the new job listings when he already has a job. After a pause, he says, "Oh yeah, maybe I should take a look").

Films such as *Wag The Dog*, *Primary Colors*, and *An American President* or television shows such as *Spin City* became direct commentaries on the current state of politics, many became part of the discourse about the Clinton-Lewinsky

scandal. For example, when the United States bombed a Sudanese pharmaceutical plant that was allegedly manufacturing chemical weapons, Kenneth Starr was asked by a reporter whether he had seen *Wag The Dog* (in which a fictional president creates a fake war as a diversion from a sex scandal) and if he saw any parallels. If he didn't, Saddam Hussein did, and earlier in the year, Iraqi television broadcast a pirated copy of the movie at the height of tensions over U.N. weapons inspections and U.S. threats to launch air strikes. And an MSNBC story noted that a statement by President Clinton explaining his initial concerns over ordering the strike was eerily similar to one made by the fictional president in *An American President* under similar circumstances.

And what of the public in this new, multi-axial environment? In some ways, as we argued earlier, this environment is evocative of the libertarian era, in which multiple points of view exist, the line between opinion and fact is less distinct, and as J. S. Mill (1859/1975) suggested, the "truth" emerges from its collision with error in the process of public deliberation. The substance of the issue aside, the ability of a nation of 250 million people (to say nothing of the worldwide audience) to follow the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal through a host of different media and genres (from straight news, to talk shows, to satire) and then discuss it and the variety of more foundational issues it raises with fellow citizens is a remarkable occurrence. Many aspects of the Internet, such as its interactivity, scope, and the ability for all users to become producers as well as consumers of information and opinion, contribute to this deliberative process. Even more mundane technology such as remote controls and VCRs allow the public to play a more active role in creating their own narratives out of the already hyperreal media discourse.

In essence, elements of the current media environment give the public new ways as a collectivity and as separate social, economic, political, and cultural communities to potentially become one (or more) of the axes of power in what Fiske (1996) described metaphorically as "a river of discourses":

At times the flow is comparatively calm; at others, the undercurrents, which always disturb the depths under even the calmest surface, erupt into turbulence. Rocks and promontories can turn its currents into eddies and counter-currents, can change its direction or even reverse its flow. Currents that had been flowing together can be separated, and one turned on the other, producing conflict out of calmness. These are deep, powerful currents . . . and these discursive "topics" swirl into each other—each is muddied with the silt of the others, none can flow in unsullied purity or isolation. Media events are sites of maximum visibility and maximum turbulence. (p. 7)

Certainly the public's reaction to the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal could be interpreted from this neoliberal (Fiske would describe it as postmodern) perspective. The evidence from public opinion surveys and media market analyses suggests that the public followed the ongoing story (through a variety of media) and knew the central issues and "facts." At the same time and despite the

efforts of the president's supporters and detractors to frame the issue, a large majority of the public created its own narrative consistent with neither group's interpretation: The president had an affair and lied about it to the public and in his deposition and testimony (despite his denials). This affair (and the other allegations of sexual misconduct) has damaged their belief in Clinton's moral character (despite his attempts to salvage his image). At the same time and despite the concerted efforts of Clinton's detractors, they consistently separated this issue from his ability to govern, said that this was essentially a private matter, and opposed resignation or impeachment, while favoring either dropping the issue or some form of censure. From this perspective, the large audiences for scandal coverage only indicates that the public found the issue entertaining and took pleasure (in a wide variety of ways) from following it but managed to keep the story in a more reasonable perspective than either the mainstream media or political elites. In many ways, it was precisely the undeniably entertaining and amusing aspects of this story that the mainstream were unable to address as they hypocritically exploited it:

The news journalists themselves obviously couldn't admit this. They spent the first weeks of the Lewinsky story desperately trying to justify their coverage of it by insisting that it was a matter of grave national concern. But the public knew better. With President Clinton's approval rating high and with his alleged behavior having demonstrably had no effect on his ability to govern, the public, in television ratings and polls, made two things clear: (1) they loved hearing about the Lewinsky affair, but (2) they believed the affair had no relevance to anything beyond itself. It was, in short, entertainment. (Gabler, 1998, p. 94)

Although in the end the scandal certainly eroded the president's ability to govern, negative public reaction to the impeachment proceedings and the outcomes of the 1998 elections illustrate the inability of the president, his opponents, or the mainstream press to control and shape events.

The ability of the public to participate in this deliberation without being fully manipulated by it results, we would argue, from the media environment discussed throughout this article, especially the declining ability of mainstream journalists and political elites to act as gatekeepers and agenda setters. In this environment, one could turn to the news (in the papers, on television, or over the Internet) to get the latest facts and rumors. One could watch Geraldo Rivera defend the president night after night and/or Chris Matthews attack him (both doing so in the context of talk shows that included guests with various points of view). One could watch the issue being described in grave legal and constitutional terms on C-Span, in human and humorous terms on *The Tonight Show*, or in a mix of both on *Politically Incorrect*. One could find out how people across the world interpret our apparent obsession. And one could access primary sources (e.g., the Clinton testimony or the Starr report).

And yet there is another side to this new information environment. Regardless of Bill Clinton's survival and the public repudiation of many of his

Republican adversaries, the ability of the administration's opponents to capture the media agenda (if not fully capture how that agenda was framed) succeeded in turning the public's and the government's attention away from other, more substantive issues, preventing the Clinton administration from taking advantage of what was arguably a very favorable political and economic climate. In addition, what we interpreted earlier as the public's fairly reasoned deliberation about the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal has an alternative explanation: The attraction is driven by the same kind of morbid fascination that leads to rubbernecking when there is a traffic accident. In this interpretation of the public mood, the hyperreality is more hyper than real and there is little difference between the public's attention to and discussion about this issue than when a particularly exciting episode of *ER* or *The X-Files* is aired. The fact that the public's reaction to charges of sexual harassment in the Paula Jones or Katherine Wiley cases or to alleged campaign finance violations by the Clinton-Gore campaign were similar to that expressed in the Monica Lewinsky case (yes, he/they probably did it; everybody does it; the economy is ok for me; nothing can be done to fix these things; so let's move on) suggests that the current media and political environments are contributing to a rising cynicism rather than a rebirth of reasoned deliberation.

Determining which of these interpretations (or more likely what combination of them) is the more accurate is the crucial issue facing students of media and politics as well as anyone concerned about the current and future state of democracy. To accomplish these tasks, we need new perspectives on and theories of the press in a democratic society that take account of the dramatically changing media environment.

### CONCLUSION: MAKING SENSE OF MONICA AND RETHINKING THE NEW MEDIA ENVIRONMENT

What changed between 1992 and 1998 reveals much about the new ways in which politics, the media, political elites, and the public interact. It seems very clear that any approach to political communication based on clear-cut distinctions between fact and opinion or public affairs and entertainment cannot hope to understand the mediated politics of the end of the 20th century.

The new media environment presents a challenge to mainstream journalists in their gatekeeping role as agenda setter and issue framer. It is telling that throughout the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal and its precursors, the mainstream press frequently paused to reflect on its own role and to try to clarify (for itself and the public) what constitutes newsworthiness.<sup>10</sup> But the existence of multiple news outlets (cable news/talk shows, radio call-in shows, conservative publications, i.e., *American Spectator*), semi-news outlets (*Hard Copy*, *A Current Affair*), entertainment media (*The Tonight Show*, *Late Night With David*

*Letterman*), and the Internet (most notably, the *Drudge Report*) all kept the issue alive and pressured both the mainstream press and political elites to respond.

One result was the collapse of anything like a daily news cycle. Although reporters still struggled to move the story forward, they did so in an environment where that story was being updated every 20 minutes. The predictable result was less time to reflect on what they were doing, more mistakes, and a reduced ability to correct those mistakes. Never has the trade-off between getting it first and getting it right been so clear. Although E. Katz (1993) noted this process for CNN during its coverage of the Gulf War, by 1998 the pressure to broadcast as well as gather news continuously had spread well beyond the cable news networks.

In short, in the 6-year period from the publication of the *Star* exposé to the publication of the Starr report, mainstream journalism lost its position as the central gatekeeper of the nation's political agenda. For most of that period (at least until 1997 and arguably until 1998), the mainstream news media attempted to play its traditional role and found that the political agenda was being set without them. More recently, it has adapted to the new rules by increasingly mimicking the form and substance of its competitors. In this new environment however, it seems unlikely that any strategy will return the traditional news sources to the preeminent position they once held. The new multi-axial reality is that much as political parties lost their place as the central actor in electoral politics, instead becoming one of several sites where politics occurs, traditional journalists are now one among many agenda setters and issue framers within the media.

Just as the new information environment created multiple axes of power within the media, it also created new axes among the political actors who operate to shape the media's agenda. Under the social responsibility theory, authoritative sources were traditionally limited to a largely mainstream political, economic, and social elite: elected officials, spokespersons for major interest groups, and so forth. These sources, although attempting to shape the media environment in ways that would benefit their particular political agenda, understood and largely operated within the rules of traditional journalism. But the new media environment with its multiple points of access and more continuous news cycle has increased the opportunities for less mainstream individuals and groups to influence public discourse.

As Fiske (1996), Lipsitz (1990), and others noted, this can sometimes lead to giving a voice to traditionally disempowered cultures and classes; however, it can also, as in the case of the Clinton scandals, lead to the capture of the political agenda by arguably unrepresentative interests. Although perhaps falling short of Hillary Clinton's VRWC claim, as we have noted earlier, from the start, the attacks on Bill Clinton's financial and sexual behavior were supported by individuals and groups associated with the religious and partisan right as well as by individuals who had a more personal vendetta against the president. The religious right as well played an important role in maintaining the momentum of the anti-Clinton campaign.<sup>11</sup>

Three points are of particular importance regarding this loosely knit network of conservative foundations, public officials, private citizens, and media organizations. First, although they undoubtedly had some tacit support among more mainstream conservatives and Republicans, by and large they operated outside the normal chain of command and often were viewed with suspicion and were publicly opposed by their more moderate and/or politically powerful colleagues. This was essentially an insurgency movement by the far right that was able to influence the public agenda through newly emerging axes of mediated political power. Although generally failing in more traditional institutional settings (e.g., the courts), they succeeded in influencing the political agenda by exploiting the new media environment through first using the right wing press, then the nonmainstream press (the Internet, cable talk shows, etc.), and ultimately the mainstream press.<sup>12</sup>

The larger point is not that the new media environment favors conservative causes—certainly the Clinton administration and its supporters were effective at using some of the same techniques in getting its side of the story into the liberal, nonmainstream, and mainstream press (one need only consider the concerted efforts to damage the reputations of Gennifer Flowers, Paula Jones, Katherine Wiley, and to a lesser extent Monica Lewinsky or the revelations of sexual misconduct by the president's critics). Neither is it to suggest that for different issues, more than one new axis of power might not emerge (e.g., imagine how the Clinton scandals might have played out if feminists had played a more visible, active role). Rather, it is to suggest this new media environment and the hyperreality it produces have created new, multiple, and shifting axes of political power.

An example of the ways in which the new media environment was actually used by the Left is provided by coverage in 2002 of Trent Lott's statements at Strom Thurmond's 100th birthday party, which ultimately led to the Mississippian's withdrawal from his position as senate majority leader. Lott's endorsement of the South Carolinian's 1948 segregationist presidential campaign was kept on the agenda after it had faded from the mainstream press largely by Internet sites, especially Josh Marshall's *Talking Point*. As Marshall said,

This was a story that the [established] press in DC was very well suited to miss, because even for people who wish it were otherwise, it's been understood for a long time that you've got various conservative Republicans who go in for this kind of stuff. Also, the way daily journalism works, a story has a 24-hour audition to see if it has legs, and if it doesn't get picked up, that's it. (Burkeman, 2002, p. 13)

At the very least, the new media environment decisively shifts the nature of arguments about what the public has the right to know. Under the social responsibility model, such debates are matters of negotiation among elites. Political elite spin doctors such as George Stephanopoulos and James Carville negotiated with mainstream journalists to keep the supposedly private affairs (literally) of

the president out of the media. Reporters and editors debated among themselves if and when there was something worth sharing with the public. Lawyers for the accusers and the accused negotiated legal settlements that prevented anyone from talking to the press or the public. Whether we ultimately believe that the public ought to know whether the president of the United States exposed himself to Paula Jones, groped Kathleen Willey, and received oral sex from Monica Lewinsky or not, such debates are no longer likely to remain within elite circles. Instead, debates in the new media environment will center on the ability of the public and elites (political and media) to openly negotiate and construct a meaningful boundary between public and private life, entertainment and serious political issues, fact and opinion, and so forth that can withstand the public disclosure of information that would have remained hidden under earlier models of political communication.

We close by noting a fundamental objection to our argument: How generalizable is coverage of the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal for political communication in general? After all, it might be argued a juicy sex scandal is tailor-made for crossing the boundaries between different types of media and for capturing the public's attention. Yet, we would argue that the changes in gatekeeping and their impact on media coverage of all political events, especially crises, are a permanent feature of the new media environment. The changes in media gatekeeping are clearly evident in coverage of the terrorist attacks of 9/11. In a piece that echoes many of the issues we raise with respect to the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal, on October 10, 2001, Caryn James wrote in *The New York Times*,

Instead of a monolithic American point of view, the audience today is receiving a global perspective, seeing news from the BBC and from Al Jazeera, the Arab television station that first carried the bin Laden and Al Qaeda tapes. The diversity of sources exists whether the American networks want to admit it or not. (p. B8)

She went on to note the discomfort of electronic journalists with this multiplicity of perspectives:

Almost all American anchors have seemed flummoxed by what to do with so much information from so many perspectives. . . . Today there is not one propaganda voice but many, including that of the United States. . . . The anchors have done little to put comments from American pundits and officials into perspective. The networks are overloaded with military analysis, mostly retired officers who do less analyzing than cheerleading. (p. B8)

James ended by addressing the issue of how individual citizens will respond to these changes and the failure of mainstream journalism to adapt to them in terms that reflect both a concern with practice and a willingness to see that the tools of critical analysis can be drawn from a wide range of sources, not just what is labeled *news*. "The audience is now in the position of juggling multiple view-

points, like the reader of a novel with several unreliable narrators. . . . As technology races ahead, our images outpacing our understanding, television desperately needs cultural analysis" (p. B8). We would argue that the ultimate ability of citizens to acquire the political curiosity and critical ability to interrogate information in the new media environment is one of the most profound questions facing American democracy in the 21st century.

## NOTES

1. This article draws heavily on our (Williams & Delli Carpini, 2000) article, "Unchained Reaction: The Collapse of Media Gatekeeping and the Clinton-Lewinsky Scandal."

2. We are indebted to John Zaller for making this point.

3. The actual quote from McLuhan (1995) is

The new media are not bridges between man and nature; they are nature. . . . The new media are not ways of relating us to the old world; they are the real world and they reshape what remains of the old world at will. (p. 272)

4. Interestingly enough, for the purposes of this article, the phrase *bimbo eruption* is usually attributed to Betsy Wright, a former Clinton chief of staff who was charged with investigating and undermining the credibility of his accusers. She (or at least a thinly disguised version of her) was played by Kathy Bates in an Academy-Award-nominated performance in the movie *Primary Colors*.

5. We are indebted to an anonymous reviewer for suggesting this point.

6. The difficulty of classifying media outlets is an interesting problem. Is *Penthouse* a mainstream publication? Fifteen years ago, the answer would likely have been no, especially in academic and elite circles. However, as Larry Flynt and *Hustler* threaten to out the sexual escapades of conservative politicians and hence play a significant role in American politics (i.e., the rapid exit from the stage of incoming House Speaker Bob Livingston), *Penthouse* begins to seem positively conservative by comparison, to say nothing of the information cycling and recycling on the Internet.

7. Reflecting the difficulty of distinguishing between different media genres, we set off the term *documentary* in quotation marks. For a fascinating account of the ways in which this movie is less a documentary than a new form of political communication reflecting a carefully crafted strategy by the Clinton campaign, see Pary-Giles and Pary-Giles (1999).

8. Again, reflecting the increasing difficulty of classifying media outlets, the *National Enquirer's* own reputation had been enhanced and begrudgingly acknowledged by members of the mainstream press as a result of its reporting during the O. J. Simpson trial.

9. See for example an interesting critical analysis of the ways in which search engines are becoming increasingly commercialized and the implications of this for the information their users are likely to recover (Rosenberg, 1999).

10. Recent attempts by the news media to police itself also point to this crisis in defining journalism: for example, the firing of several reporters and columnists at the *Boston Globe* and *The Washington Post* for inaccurate reporting, the resignation of a local newscaster in protest over the hiring of talk show host Jerry Springer, the decision by ABC to not air a docudrama by Oliver Stone about the downing of TWA Flight 800 out of fear that it would confuse viewers, the ongoing criticism of public journalism by mainstream members of the press, and so forth.

11. The Christian Defense Coalition contributed to the Paula Jones suit by setting up the Paula Jones Legal Expenses Fund. Other religious, conservative, and/or Republican individuals and groups such as Gilbert Davis (who had supported George Bush in 1988), the Legal Affairs Council (which had originally been set up to help defend Oliver North during the Iran-Contra scandal), and

the Rutherford Institute (a not for profit that focuses on issues of religious freedom) also pledged contributions to aid in Paula Jones's defense.

12. The Republican losses in the 1998 congressional elections, resulting in part from their failed strategy regarding the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal, and the subsequent meltdown within the GOP leadership point to the extent to which mainstream members of the party had lost control of their own agenda.

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## PROJECT FOR EXCELLENCE IN JOURNALISM

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### **The Latest News Headlines—Your Vote Counts**

If someday we have a world without journalists, or at least without editors, what would the news agenda look like? How would citizens make up a front page differently than professional news people?

If a new crop of user-news sites—and measures of user activity on mainstream news sites—are any indication, the news agenda will be more diverse, more transitory, and often draw on a very different and perhaps controversial list of sources, according to a new study.

The report, released by the Project for Excellence in Journalism (PEJ), compared the news agenda of the mainstream media for one week with the news agenda found on a host of user-news sites for the same period.

In a week when the mainstream press was focused on Iraq and the debate over immigration, the three leading user-news sites--Reddit, Digg and Del.icio.us--were more focused on stories like the release of Apple's new iPhone and that Nintendo had surpassed Sony in net worth, according to the study.

The report also found subtle differences in three other forms of user-driven content within one site: Yahoo News' Most Recommended, Most Viewed, and Most Emailed.

The question of whether citizens define the news differently than professionals is becoming increasingly relevant. It started with offering visitors a sense of what others found interesting: what news stories were most emailed and most viewed?

Soon, establishment news sites like CBSNews.com allowed users to make their own newscasts. Then, names like Digg, Reddit and Del.icio.us emerged as virtual town squares that became a way to measure the pulse of what the web community finds most newsworthy, most captivating, or just amusing. The trend continues, as even Myspace, the social networking site popular among 20-somethings, has launched a news page (<http://news.myspace.com>).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Myspace launched its news page on April 19, 2007. The Project considered including MySpace News in the study but the site is still in Beta form and at the time the study, there was very little user activity. On average, the top stories received just one vote and some on the home page of the site had no votes whatsoever.

Indeed, these user-driven sites have entered the news business, or perhaps more accurately, they have entered the news *dissemination* business. Reporting is not a part of their charge. Instead, they turn to others for content and then they bestow users with the task of deciding what makes it on the page.

What do individuals do with that power? What kind of events or issues do they choose to highlight? And how does it differ from the news the mainstream press offers?

To find out, PEJ took a snapshot of coverage from the week of June 24 to June 29, 2007, on three sites that offer user-driven news agendas: Digg, Del.icio.us and Reddit. In addition, the Project studied Yahoo News, an outlet that offers an editor-based news page and three different lists of user-ranked news: Most Recommended, Most Viewed, and Most Emailed. These sites were then compared with the news agenda found in the 48 mainstream news outlets contained in PEJ's News Coverage Index.

A total of 644 stories from the three user-driven sites and Yahoo News's three most popular pages were coded for the study and then compared to 1,395 stories from the same time period in PEJ's News Coverage Index. The report first compared the content of the user-sites to that of the mainstream press. Next, it compared the three user-sites to each other. Finally, the study looked at the three user-oriented pages on Yahoo News, comparing them to Yahoo's editor-selected news page, to the other user-sites, and to each other.

Some key findings include:

- The news agenda of the three user-sites that week was markedly different from that of the mainstream press. Many of the stories users selected did not appear anywhere among the top stories in the mainstream media coverage studied. And there was often little in the way of follow-up. Most stories on the user-news sites appeared only once, never to be repeated again in the week we studied.
- The sources user news sites draw on are strikingly different from the mainstream media. Seven in ten stories (70%) on the user sites come either from blogs or Web sites such as YouTube and WebMd that do not focus mostly on news.
- The three user news sites differed from one another in subtle ways. Reddit was the most likely to focus on political events from Washington, such as coverage of Vice President Cheney; Digg was particularly focused on the release of Apple's new iPhone; Del.icio.us had the most fragmented mix of stories and the least overlap with the News Index.
- On Yahoo News—even when picking from a limited list of stories Yahoo editors had already pared down—users' top stories only rarely matched those of the news professionals.

- There were mostly similarities in what people are most likely to email each other versus what they recommend or view on Yahoo News. But there were some differences. Most Recommended stories focused more on “news you can use” such as advice from the World Health Organization to exercise one’s legs during long flights; the Most Viewed stories were often breaking news, more sensational in nature, with a heavy dose of crime and celebrity; and the Most Emailed stories were more diverse, with a mix of the practical and the oddball.
- Despite claims that the Web would internationalize consumers’ news diets, coverage across the three user-news sites focused more on domestic events and less on news from abroad than the mainstream media that week. Yahoo News, both on its main news page and three most popular pages, meanwhile, stood out for being decidedly more international that week.

In short, the user-news agenda, at least in this one-week snapshot, was more diverse, yet also more fragmented and transitory than that of the mainstream news media. This does not mean necessarily that users disapprove or reject the mainstream news agenda. These user sites may be supplemental for audiences. They may gravitate to them in addition to, rather than instead of, traditional venues. But the agenda they set is nonetheless quite different.

This initial report is based on a limited sample—a one week snapshot—to get a first sense of differences and similarities in user-driven and mainstream media. PEJ intends in a future study to delve further into this area of research.

### **The Big Picture**

Past research by PEJ has found that week-to-week mainstream media tend to focus on a handful of major events that they monitor continuously over the course of a week or a month. Whether it be floods in the Midwest, the death of Anna Nicole Smith or debate over the President’s “surge” policy in Iraq, a sizable amount of airtime or space is often spent on just a handful of “big” stories of the week.

The week of June 24 was no different. There were no major breaking events demanding special media attention, but a handful of stories emphasizing political events in Washington and conflicts abroad dominated.

During that week, the immigration debate led the coverage, accounting for 10% of all news stories in the News Coverage Index. That was followed by coverage of a major fire near Lake Tahoe (6%), the failed bombings in the United Kingdom (6%), events on the ground in Iraq (6%), Supreme Court decisions (5%), the 2008 presidential election (4%), flooding in Texas (4%), the policy debate in the capitol over the war in Iraq (4%), U.S. domestic terrorism (3%), and the missing pregnant woman in Ohio (3%). In all, the top ten stories that week accounted for 51% of all the stories in the Index.

In the user-generated sites, these stories were barely visible. Overall, just 5% of the stories captured on these three sites overlapped with the ten most widely-covered stories in the Index (13% for Reddit, 4% for Digg, and 0% for Del.icio.us).

The immigration debate in Congress, the biggest single story of the week in the mainstream media, appeared just once as a top-ten story on Reddit, and not at all on Digg and Del.icio.us. Similarly, the war in Iraq accounted for 10% of all stories in the Index and seven percent in the Yahoo-user material. Across the three user-news sites, it amounted to about 1%.

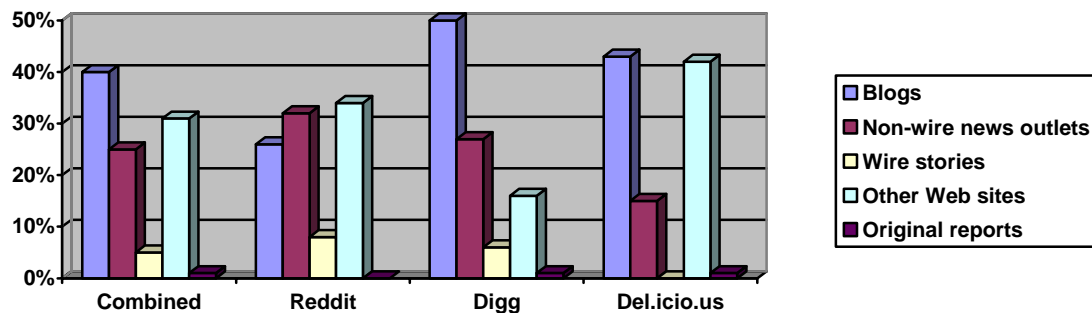
What were the favorite stories on the user-driven sites? For the most part, there were no dominant ones. The only story with any real traction was the release of the Apple iPhone, and that was just on one site (it accounted for 16% of the stories on Digg that week). Otherwise, users put forth a mix of diverse and unconnected news events from day to day. On the morning of June 26 on Digg, for example, a story about intelligent design topped the list followed by a story about a woman suing record labels for malicious prosecution. But by 5pm that day, both had vanished from the top ten.

## Sources

One reason the line up of stories on the user-news sites may be different from the mainstream media is where they are drawn from. About seven in ten (70%) stories on Del.icio.us, Reddit and Digg, originally appeared on blogs and sties that generally offer very little news.

Overall, four in ten (40%) stories originated on blogs. Another sizable share (31%) originated on sites that offer information but were not news, such as YouTube, WebMd or Technorati. A quarter (25%) of stories originated from mainstream news outlets such as the BBC News and Slate. Only a fraction (5%) came from wire stories from Associated Press or Reuters, which make up so much of the content on many of the news aggregators on the Web. About 1% appeared as an original report.

**Origin of Stories**



There were some differences during the week in which of these non-traditional forms users drew from on each site. Del.icio.us drew more from blogs and non-news

information sites (e.g. The Guardian). Digg users dug blogs more than any other source. Reddit relied more evenly on blogs, mainstream news outlets (other than wire services) and non-news sites.

Yahoo News, in contrast, was much more likely to draw on mainstream news sources, particularly the news wires, during our study. On Yahoo News's main page, 100% were wire stories. Similarly, nine in ten stories (91%) stories on Yahoo News's three most popular pages also came from the wires, with no less than 85% on each of these pages originating as wire content. The remaining stories (9%), meanwhile, initially appeared on now-wire, news Web sites.

### **Broad Topic**

The best way to get a sense of trend among these sites is to look not at specific news events, but at broad topic areas such as politics, crime, and foreign affairs. Here, some consistency emerges day-to-day, and reveals again a focus quite different from editor-selected news.

Across Del.icio.us, Digg and to a lesser extent Reddit, technology and science stories drove coverage, with technology accounting for most of the coverage in this category.

On both Digg and Del.icio.us, roughly 40% of the stories were devoted to technology and science. They were only about half as common on Reddit (22%), but that was still more than ten times the coverage in the Index that week. There, technology and science stories accounted for just 2% of the stories.

On Digg and Del.icio.us, that 40% was made up of different stories. On Digg, the release of Apple's iPhone, released June 29, accounted for more than four in ten (41%) of all technology-related news. That story was completely absent on Del.icio.us, whose users pushed more stories about the latest high-tech moves by social networking sites.

A greater emphasis on technology may come naturally to this group of Internet users, found by the Pew Internet & American Life Project to be among those first to embrace sophisticated Web activities.<sup>2</sup>

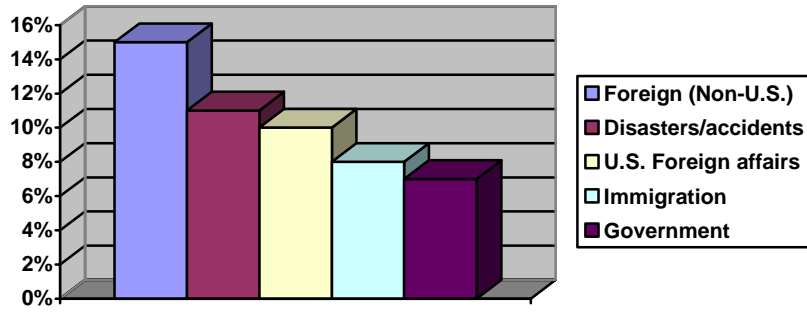
Coverage about everyday lifestyle activities and concerns was the second most popular topic area on user-driven sites. Roughly two-in-ten stories (20%) on Del.icio.us fit this bill, more than what was found on both Reddit (15%) and Digg (11%). In the mainstream media, by contrast, lifestyle stories amounted to about 3%.

As an example, Del.icio.us and Reddit both linked to a story about fruit and vegetables eating each other told through Photo-Shopped pictures. And both Digg and Reddit both linked to an amateur Web site in which the author showed photos he took by attaching a camera to a kite.

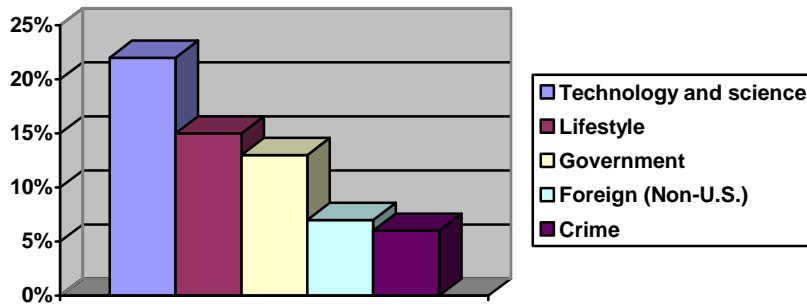
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<sup>2</sup> "28% of Online Americans Have Used the Internet to Tag Content," Pew Internet and American Life Project, January 31, 2007. [http://www.pewinternet.org/pdfs/PIP\\_Tagging.pdf](http://www.pewinternet.org/pdfs/PIP_Tagging.pdf)

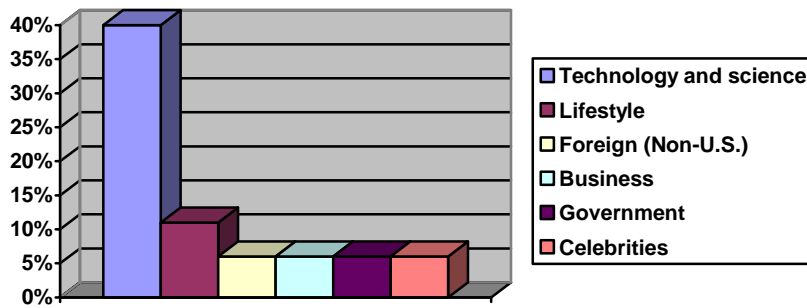
**News Index: Top Five Broad Topics**



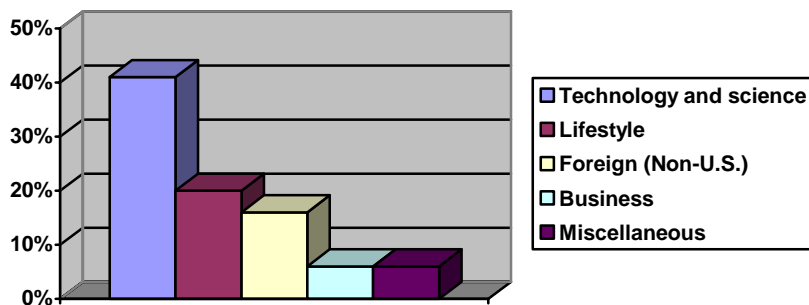
**Reddit: Top Five Broad Topics**



**Digg: Top Five Broad Topics**



### Del.icio.us: Top Five Broad Topics



One topic area that both users and professional editors gave similar treatment to the week of June 24 was crime. In a week when the story of the murder suicide of wrestler Chris Benoit was breaking, crime accounted for 7% of the stories both in the mainstream news media and on Reddit, followed closely by Digg (5%). On Del.icio.us, however, just one crime story appeared in the downloads.

Coverage from Washington, a traditionally popular topic area among the mainstream media, was of much interest to Reddit users but considerably less so to users on the other two user-news sites. On Reddit, coverage of the federal government accounted for 13%. On Digg, it fell to 6% and readers of Del.icio.us—at least in the top-ten stories of each download—would find themselves completely freed of the subject.

The Washington-based story that carried most of the interest on these sites was Dick Cheney's use of executive supremacy, largely fueled by reaction to the Washington Post's exposé on the Vice President that week. Four percent of all stories on Reddit and 2% on Digg were devoted to coverage—often very critical—of Cheney.

Readers across the three user-news sites were also more inclined to focus on events within the U.S. borders. Looking at the geographic focus, coverage on the three user-news sites this week was even more U.S.-centric than the mainstream media as measured by the Index. Digg led the way, with 89% of stories falling in this category, with Reddit (83%) and Del.icio.us (81%) close behind. In the mainstream media, 71% of stories were focused on events from home.

Meanwhile, coverage on Yahoo News' most popular pages was more international than what we found in both the mainstream press and the three user-driven sites. Nearly three in ten stories (28%) covered topics from abroad. In comparison, the percentage of foreign news (non-U.S.) was 15% in the Index and 10% on the three user-driven sites.

### The Individual Sites

The three user-generated sites had a lot of the same characteristics. Still, there were a few things that make each one stand apart.

## *Digg*

Digg, launched in December 2004, is the most popular of the three user-news sites, according to data from Hitwise, which measures Web traffic for over one million online businesses. At the end of June 2007, when PEJ's content analysis was conducted, Digg was the 194th most popular site in the Computers and Internet category. The site's audience is more male (57%) than female (42%). It is also had the youngest audience of the three user-news sites we studied, with just under half (47%) of all users between the ages of 18 and 34.

The content is entirely user-driven. Registered users submit and vote on content, "digging" those they like and "burying" those they don't. The stories with the most "digs" move to the top of the page, with the order changing almost every minute as users submit and vote on new content.<sup>3</sup>

What users of Digg seem to choose most is technology and science news. Amounting to four-in-ten stories (versus 2% of all stories in the News Index), technology headlines for the week ranged from new features on Facebook—the popular social networking site—to tips on how to build your own lap top.

But it was the release of the iPhone that dominated the technology and science category, with 16% of all news stories on Digg that week. Stories included hundreds of people waiting outside stores to get their iPhones and reviews from various techie Web sites like TechCrunch, Pogue and also techie columnist, Walter Mossberg of the Wall Street Journal. Behind that, at 6%, was another technology-related big story, video game consoles, which are interactive computer devices that are used exclusively to play video games.

Digg's heavy dose of technology and science stories mirrored that of Del.icio.us (41%), though Del.icio.us's technology and science stories tended to focus more on social networking Web sites like Twitter and Foldera.

Of all the other outlets studied, Digg was also the most U.S. national-centric at 89%, slightly higher than what it was on Reddit (83%) and Del.icio.us (81%), and considerably more than what it was in the Index (71%).

## *Del.icio.us*

The Web site Del.icio.us, founded by 32-year old Joshua Schachter in late 2003, is the "oldest" of the three sites studied. It was acquired by Yahoo in December of 2005 and was the 410th most popular site in Hitwise's Computers and Internet category at the end of June. Del.icio.us, unlike Reddit and Digg, had more female (55%) users than male (45%) users. It was also skewed the oldest, with the lowest percentage (35%) of users under 35.

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<sup>3</sup> Alexa.com, May 2007.

Del.icio.us is also 100% user-driven but works a little differently than Digg. Del.icio.us is a social “bookmarking” Web site, which lets users “tag” content they find most interesting. So when users find a piece of content (or an entire Web site) that they want to share—whether they find it on Del.icio.us or an outside news outlet—they “tag” it and add a list of keywords to describe the story.

The site then offers several ways for visitors to view the content. Most immediately, there is a “Hot List” on the homepage which lists content items that contain the “hottest” keywords of the moment.<sup>4</sup> Users can choose to view a list of the “most popular” content, or that with the most number of tags from users. This subject-based content was the page analyzed for this report.

In the week studied, Del.icio.us had the most fragmented mix of stories and the least overlap with the mainstream News Index. Overall, just 3% of its stories were devoted to continuous, major stories that dominate the mainstream news media. Rather, stories on Del.icio.us were of a more eclectic flavor, such as one on how to make coffee in Japanese and another on the nature of airplane seating.

Not surprisingly, the content on the site resulted, during the week studied, in a more diverse range of topics than the other two sites. Technology and science stories still dominated, at 41%, with articles on the history of Adobe Photoshop, how tagging works on social bookmarking sites, and shortcuts on the popular Internet encyclopedia site, Wikipedia.

There were also a high number of lifestyle stories, such as a link to a Web site that rates more 20,000 hostels. Two in ten (20%) stories overall fell into the lifestyle category, a higher number than what we found on Reddit (15%) or Digg (11%). Meanwhile, they made up just three percent in the News Index that week.

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<sup>4</sup> FN: The programming for this is based on what the industry terms a “folksonomy,” a non-hierarchical way of categorizing content by using tags (freely-chosen keywords).

## *Reddit*

Reddit, founded in 2005 by Steve Huffman and Alexis Ohanian, two recent graduates of the University of Virginia, and then later acquired by Condé Nast Publications in October 2006, is the newest of the three user-news sites. Data from Hitwise found that Reddit had the smallest audience of the three sites we studied, ranking 1,222 at the end of June. Meanwhile, other data showed that it had the highest percentage (64%) of men and almost as many users (45%) 18 to 34 as Digg (47%) did during the week we conducted the research.

Its content selection is based on user submission followed by “up” or “down” votes. Next to each of the 25 stories on its homepage there is an up and a down arrow for users to vote for or against the content. Stories with the most “up” votes rise to the top. According to *Wired*, “web content posted to Reddit tends to center on politics, opinion and world news.”<sup>5</sup>

In the week studied, Reddit too showed a high affinity for technology and science stories, though it also included the most coverage of Washington politics.

More than two in ten (22%) stories on Reddit covered technology and science issues. But while technology and science was the most popular story topic on Reddit, it was roughly half the percentage on both Digg (40%) and Del.icio.us (41%).

The second most popular topic was lifestyle (15%). This number was similar to what was found on Digg (11%) but less than what it was on Del.icio.us (20%).

The third most popular topic was coverage of the federal government, at 13% (compared to about 5% on Digg and none at all on Del.icio.us). The bulk of government stories on Reddit were about President Bush and Vice President Cheney, with particular reference to eavesdropping programs and coverage of the Vice President in which he claimed he was not part of the Executive branch.

In terms of specific stories, Reddit focused most heavily on domestic terrorism (7%). These stories included a cartoon that made fun of President Bush for allowing the NSA eavesdropping program. Domestic terrorism did not receive similar coverage from any of the other outlets.

The next three most popular stories on Reddit were the Vice President Cheney controversy (4%), Supreme Court actions (3%), and video game consoles (3%).

In terms of geographic focus, Reddit was similar to Digg and Del.icio.us. Eighty-three percent of all its stories were U.S.-centric, parallel to Digg (89%) and Del.icio.us (81%).

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.wired.com/techbiz/it/news/2006/10/72038>

## Yahoo News

In addition to examining the content on three of the most popular user-based news Web sites, PEJ also closely examined one outlet that offers both an editor-based news page as well as lists of user-ranked news: Yahoo News. Yahoo's main news page, ([www.news.yahoo.com](http://www.news.yahoo.com)), the most popular news Web site in the U.S. according to both comScore and Nielsen//Net Ratings, is controlled by editors who select stories from 7,000 different news outlets, according to Yahoo News's Web site. In addition, the site offers three user-driven lists of stories: the most viewed, the most-recommended, and the most emailed.

We closely examined the top stories on each of these pages from June 24 to 29 to get a sense of how different (or similar) the user stories were from the editor-selected stories and also to see if there were differences in the stories that were recommended versus those that were highest read or the most emailed.

Looking at the broad topic areas, both Yahoo News and its user-organized pages (emailed, viewed and recommended) were more focused on international events not involving U.S. interests that week than the overall media studied in the News Index. A third (32%) of all stories on Yahoo News main page and 28% of those on its user-organized pages was coverage of events from overseas, such as the Israeli-Palestinian and Lebanese conflicts.

Beyond that, however, the topics differed. The user-ranked stories tended to be more about health and medicine (8% versus 0% of the Yahoo News stories), lifestyle (7% versus 0% on Yahoo News) and crime (7% versus 0%).

The specific story selections varied even more. On each day studied, at most two or three stories out of the 30 across these three lists corresponded to top stories on the main news page.<sup>6</sup>

For example, on June 27, Yahoo News's main page at 9 am led with news of Tony Blair's resignation. The resignation was nowhere to be found on the user-lists. Instead, it was the death of fashion designer Liz Claiborne as the Most Viewed; a health tip about antioxidants as the Most Recommended story; and the Justice Department subpoena of the White House and the Vice President's office as the Most Emailed story.

Meanwhile, some stories remained on the list for more than one download. For example, an article about a study that found California to be the state with the worst traffic in the country appeared on Yahoo's Most Viewed on the evening of June 28<sup>th</sup> and then again, the next morning.

If users, then, are making different selections than editors, are they also emailing different stories than they view? How do their recommendations to others fit in?

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<sup>6</sup> For comparison purposes, we compared the 9 am. list of stories on the main news page with those found on the user-based pages at 5 pm. This way, editor-selected stories had time to resonate with users.

The broad topic areas were similar across the three with the greatest percent of stories that week devoted to foreign affairs that did not involve U.S. interests. This topic accounted for 35% of Most Recommended, 29% of Most Emailed and 22% of Most Viewed.

Crime was also a popular topic, though considerably less than foreign affairs (non-U.S.): 5% of Most Recommended, 7% of Most Emailed, and 8% of Most Viewed. One subject area treated different this week was health and medicine which was a popular choice for users of the Most Recommended (15%) and Most Emailed (7%) though it accounted for just 2% on the Most Viewed page.

The real flavor of the lists comes from looking at the specific stories. Just under a quarter (22%) of the 314 stories appeared more than once. Most often, this meant it was included in two of the different rankings at the same time. For example, a story about the indictment of four men for allegedly trying to blow up JFK airport appeared on Yahoo's Most Recommended and on Yahoo's Most Viewed list on June 29 at 5 pm.

These individual stories reflect the subtle differences between the three most popular pages. On Yahoo's Most Recommended Page, the highest percentage of coverage was on foreign events not involving the U.S. (it was also the most popular category across the other two user-driven sites but considerably less prominent).

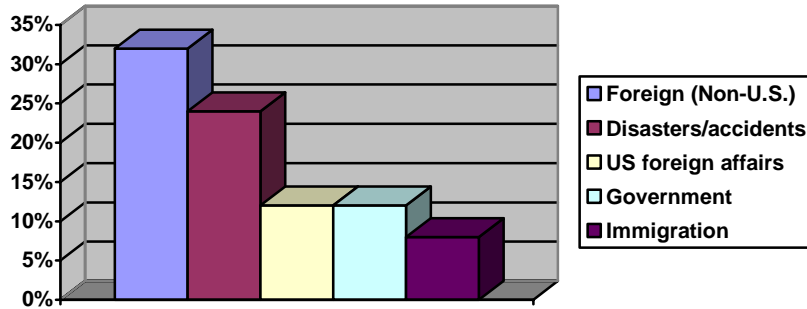
Beyond that, the Most Recommended page was most likely to include "news you can use," such as articles on the Chinese pet food recall story which enumerated types of food that could be life-threatening to one's cat or dog. In fact, one in ten (10%) stories on the Most Recommend Page was devoted to this issue.

While the Most Emailed page also included a fair amount of news useful to readers, it was the most diverse and fragmented of the three pages, with just 21% of all stories on this page devoted to the big, continuous stories that dominate the Index (in contrast, 52% of the Most Recommended Stories and 55% of Most Viewed were big stories). Indeed, the most prominent stories, at 2%, were immigration, the story of a missing pregnant woman in Ohio, and the fire in the Lake Tahoe region. There were also a considerable number of oddball stories. The 5pm download on June 26 reflects this eclectic mix of hard and soft news, with stories on the immigration debate and Iraqi refugees heading to the U.S. competing with stories on the world's ugliest dog and Peruvians' appetite for eating guinea pigs.

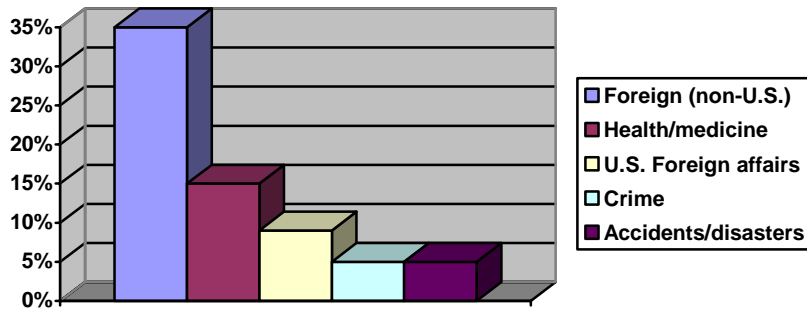
Finally, the Most Viewed page was the most sensational of the three most popular pages, with the most breaking news on celebrity and crime stories. Eleven percent of all stories were celebrity-related stories, compared to 3% of Most Emailed and just 1% of Most Recommended. Meanwhile, crime accounted for 8% of all coverage on Most Viewed, slightly higher than what it was on Most Emailed (7%) and Most Recommended (5%). The lineup at 9 am on June 27 illustrates this trend, with stories on media coverage of Paris Hilton, an ex-marine teacher fending off a would-be pick pocketer, the singer

Beyonce, the pro wrestler Chris Benoit accused of murdering his family, and concern that gas stations are ripe for ID theft.

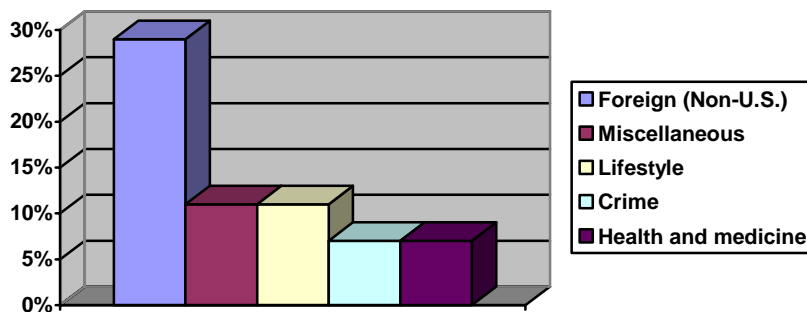
**Yahoo News Main Page: Top Five Broad Topics**



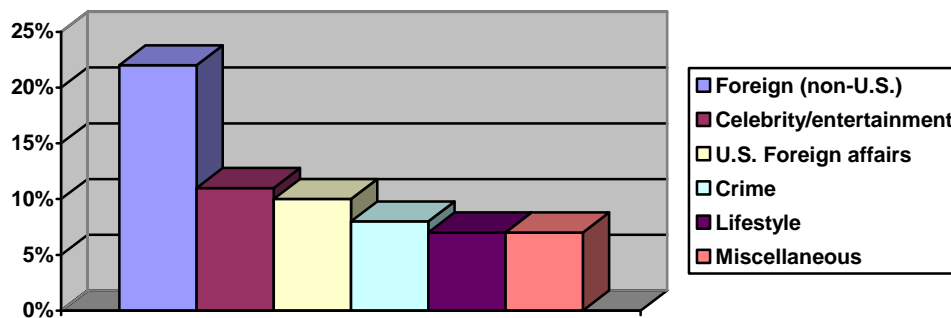
**Yahoo News Most Recommended: Top Five Broad Topics**



**Yahoo News Most Emailed: Top Five Broad Topics**



### Yahoo News Most Viewed: Top Five Broad Topics



### Conclusion

Just a few years ago, when user-driven media was in its infancy, even the strongest supporters worried about its capacity to inform the public, a role the mainstream media had claimed for at least a century. A well-known advocate for expanding the role of citizens in journalism, Dan Gillmor, wondered and worried in 2004 what would happen to the traditional business model for journalism when we reached the tipping point where the audience for traditional media shrank, and user-driven media surpassed it:

“Who will do big investigative projects, backed by deep pockets and the ability to pay expensive lawyers when powerful interests try to punish those who exposed them, if the business model collapses? Who would have exposed the Watergate crimes in the absence of powerful publishers, especially The Washington Post’s Katherine Graham, who had the financial and moral fortitude to stand up to Richard Nixon and his henchmen. At a more prosaic level, who will serve, for better or worse, as a principal voice of a community or region? Flawed as we may be in the business of journalism, anarchy in news is not my idea of a solution.”

For now, the percentage of Americans who rely exclusively on news from user-driven sites is just a fraction of what it is for mainstream news sites. And in this increasingly fragmented era, many who visit Digg, Del.icio.us, and Reddit may also be reading the online versions of The New York Times and The Wall Street Journal. But whether or not we see further divergence between user-driven sites and mainstream media over the next few years will surely remain a key question for researchers, journalists and of course, citizens.

### Methodology

This study compares the news stories from user-determined news aggregators with those that were part of PEJ’s News Coverage Index. In this study PEJ chose to look at three different independent user-news sites: Digg, Del.icio.us and Reddit. In addition, PEJ looked at the three components of Yahoo News that depend on user input. These are Yahoo News Most Emailed stories, Yahoo News Most Recommended stories and Yahoo News Most Viewed stories. For each Web site mentioned, PEJ studied the top-ten stories

on the homepage. This study looks at how topics in user-news aggregators compare with the larger, mainstream news media.

PEJ's News Coverage Index is a thorough content analysis study of the topics that appear in the news media every week. The universe for the Index consists of 48 media outlets including newspapers, network television, cable television, online news sites and radio. A team of trained coders captures and analyzes each of the outlets. We code segments of these outlets that serve as a purposive sample of the larger media universe. The Index's methodology details the rigorous standards followed for its coding.

The News Coverage Index is weighted according to media sector, and stories are presented as percentages of the entire newshole (click [here](#) for NCI Methodology).

For the purposes of this study on user-news aggregators, we focused on the number of stories alone and presented them as percentages of the total number of stories. Digg, Del.icio.us and Reddit link outside the host site and the size of a story is not an editorial decision made by the site itself. So we only measured how many of the total stories were about a particular topic. This particular study diverged from the News Coverage Index in that it did not measure the newshole.

To avoid discontinuity, we recalculated the percentages for each story in the News Coverage Index so that it would exclude weighting, word and time counts. For the purposes of this study, variables in the News Coverage Index were re-tabulated to measure how many from the total of 1,395 stories were devoted to a particular geographic focus, big or broad story topic. Since calculations about the News Coverage Index were done without weighting, statistics that appear in this study may differ from the numbers that appeared in other PEJ studies.

The time period for this comparative study is from a randomly selected week beginning Sunday, June 24, 2007 and ending on Friday, June 29, 2007. The universe for this particular comparison consists of the top ten stories featured on Digg, Del.icio.us, Reddit and the Most Emailed, Most Viewed and Most Recommended stories from Yahoo News. A team of professional coders analyzed the top stories that appeared on the homepage (homepage refers to the main news page for each site). All Yahoo stories are hosted by Yahoo, but each sector—Most Emailed, Most Viewed, and Most Recommended—has its top ten stories listed on a different homepage. The content analysis of this study was conducted under the supervision of PEJ's methodologist.

Each site was downloaded every day between June 24 and June 29 at 9am and at 5pm. A total of 644 stories were coded and used for this study.

For Yahoo News, the main page for each of the three sectors listed the top ten stories, so that there were a total of 30 Yahoo stories per download.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> For the following days and times Yahoo News Most Emailed listed less than ten stories:

- For June 24, only the top 10 stories at 9 am were coded and included in the study.
- On June 26, at 9 am, only 5 stories appeared on the homepage.

At Digg.com, the homepage listed all the highest recommended stories. Of these the top ten were included in the study.

For Del.icio.us, the page lists all the most recommended stories, and from this the top ten were coded and included in the study.

Reddit's homepage listed 25 most recommended stories. Of these, the top ten were coded and included in the study.

The protocol designed for this study was derived from that used for the Weekly News Coverage Index to maintain consistency. Eleven variables were coded including coder ID, story number, source, date (on which the story appeared on the homepage), download time, origin (story format), geographic focus, broad story topic, big story topic, sub story topic and story describer.

Variable source includes all three Web sites that were part of the study and the source of the story refers to the Web site (Yahoo News Most Emailed, Yahoo News Most Viewed, Yahoo News Most Recommended, Digg, Del.icio.us, or Reddit) that listed the story coded.

The origin variable refers to the format of the story, tracking whether the linked story appeared on the Web site server, a blog post, a news outlet, whether it was a wire story, or if it linked to a completely different site, which is not generally regarded as a news source.

Geographic focus concerns the location where the story originated, measuring whether a story was a U.S. story, a U.S.-international story or an international story that did not include the U.S.

The variable for broad story topic determined the general topic categories that were addressed by the story. The list of broad story topics used for this study was the same as those used by the Weekly News Coverage Index.

Big stories are particular news stories that recur frequently in the news during the time period under study.

Variable sub story refers to developments, aspects and features of those long-running big story topics that occur most often in the media. Stories in this study were coded using the same list of big stories and sub stories that was used for the News Coverage Index for the week beginning June 24.

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- On June 27, at 5 pm, only 6 stories appeared on the homepage.
  - On June 29, at 9 am, only 3 stories appeared on the homepage.